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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, OSD FOR DMELLEBY, USNATO FOR HEVANS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL MOPS MARR AJ GE TX

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: GERMAN MOD COMMENTS CLOSE OFF AWACS ISSUE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Donald Lu, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).).

¶1. (C) Summary. Local media gave top billing August 28 to reporting Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan's apparent refusal to allow Konya (Turkey)-based NATO AWACS aircraft to overfly their territory en route to their NATO missions over Afghanistan. The news broke through a statement by a German MOD spokesman, Thomas Raabe, in Suddeutsche Zeitung that "uncooperative allies" had refused permission and therefore the deployment that the Bundestag had specifically authorized to support the mission had to be recalled. In the local context the reports are unusual, because there has been very little effort by any Allied mission to push the issue here, and there was no confirmation of an outright refusal. However, it was clear from the outset that the GOAJ was apprehensive about the idea because of its lack of knowledge of the capabilities of the E-3 aircraft, and more importantly the optics of the issue vis--vis Russia and Iran. GOAJ reaction to the media attention has been indirect. The Embassy is monitoring whether this latest controversy is likely to invite scrutiny of existing blanket U.S. overflight arrangements. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Raabe's statement blaming Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan for the recall of the German assets from Konya ran in Suddeutsche Zeitung August 26. Responses from GOAJ ministries have been minimal. MOD denied any knowledge of the issue and referred questioners to MFA. MFA spokesman Elshan Polukhov avoided the issue, noted Azerbaijan's recent doubling of its military contingent in Afghanistan and reiterated Azerbaijan's commitment to cooperate in peacekeeping efforts. The German Embassy also denied any knowledge of the issue. (Comment: The German Embassy's denial of knowledge is credible. The German mission is small and disengaged on most issues. End Note.)

¶3. (C) In fact, there was little diplomatic effort in Baku on the issue to supplement whatever discussions were going on in Brussels. Apart from the brief visit of the SYG's Special Representative to the Caucasus and Central Asia Bob Simmons on 24 July and an earlier, discreet mention by Charge to presidential adviser Novruz Mammedov on July 17, both of which were inconclusive, we know of no other concerted efforts or formal requests that would have drawn a definitive reply from the GOAJ.

¶4. (C) The public commentary by Germany is likely to make this issue very difficult to recover. Local press speculated

that the government's refusal - which media reports all took as a given - was due to Russian pressure. The GOAJ was clearly sensitive to this issue, as the unusual downplaying of Simmons' visit attests (no NATO embassies were briefed or participated in any aspect of the visit.) Whether or not Moscow intervened in the issue, the "fact" of Azerbaijan's refusal is public knowledge and a chip Baku can try to cash in with Russia at a later time. Also, even as Baku discussed the issue in good faith with Simmons, they were unlikely to take the plunge unless they knew the Turkmen were about to do the same.

¶5. (C) Comment. Regardless of whether Azerbaijan refused outright NATO's requests for AWACS overflight, the German MOD comments have created that fact on the ground in Baku. Existing U.S. gas-and-go and blanket overflight for transport aircraft are immensely valuable. Pushing the NATO AWACS issue further in Azerbaijan raises considerable risk that our existing arrangements could be called into question.

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